

U.S. Deputy Secretary of Labor Seth Harris Visited Rochester Today to Speak Directly With Local Growers

Latest Effort By Slaughter to Cut Through Red Tape and Keep Government Accountable

Rochester, NY – Congresswoman Louise Slaughter (NY-28) today welcomed U.S. Department of Labor Deputy Secretary Seth Harris to Rochester where he joined with local growers and local farm organizations for a second forum to discuss improvements made to a federal program pivotal to a productive harvest season.

Harris came to Rochester at Slaughter's invitation to hear directly from the growers from across Upstate their experiences using the H-2A agriculture guestworker program and to gather insight on how the Department of Labor can continue its efforts, along with Slaughter, to improve the program.

This discussion began last July when Slaughter organized a summit in Washington with the U.S. DOL and local growers that resulted in several important administrative and communication improvements to the H-2A program, which is vital for growers to maintain the labor force needed to keep the upstate agricultural economy humming.

"I'm so happy to welcome my friend Deputy Secretary Harris to Rochester because I know his dedication to improving the program that is so necessary for our Upstate economy," said Slaughter. "I'm so pleased to have my friends who make their living growing the best fresh produce in this country here today, whose input has been invaluable to this process. Last July when we were all together in Washington we had one of the best meetings I've had in my time in Congress. Today we've had another opportunity to discuss how improvements already being made are working and what is in the works to better streamline their ability to get the workers they need. Growers who deal with the H-2A application process know it to be cumbersome and complex, but I know that's beginning to change and I'm delighted for it. They already gamble with the weather, they shouldn't have to gamble with federal paperwork to obtain a legal workforce, and I'm doing everything I can to help them continue to put fresh fruits and vegetables in our markets."

"I am pleased to be able to return to Rochester to continue my dialogue with Congresswoman Louise Slaughter and area farmers regarding reforms to the H-2A program," said U.S. Deputy Secretary of Labor Seth Harris. "Congresswoman Slaughter's efforts to bring growers' concerns to the Labor Department's attention have already led to important improvements in the administration of the H-2A program. Today's meeting is the next step in that process: an opportunity to hear directly from Congresswoman Slaughter and the farmers, learn whether the changes we've implemented are working, and discuss how we can further improve the process moving forward. I am grateful to Congresswoman Slaughter for her advocacy on behalf of Western new York farmers and for her partnership in this effort."

Harris' visit is the latest step in Slaughter's decade-long efforts to give Upstate growers direct input into improvements to the H-2A program made by the Department of Labor. Slaughter, as a long-time advocate for farmers, stepped in to work with the DOL in streamlining their administration of the H-2A program, stating that the program suffers from delays, paperwork burdens, and confusion for both growers and program administrators. These bureaucratic hurdles put the economic vitality of Western New York farmers at risk. As the number one economic driver in Upstate New York, a thriving agriculture industry is essential for the Empire State, she argued.

At risk are Upstate New York's seasonal fruit and vegetable crops that create thousands of jobs in Upstate New York and contribute millions of dollars to the regional economy. Growers from across Upstate and across the country have long said that the H-2A guestworker program needs improvements to help ensure access to the labor necessary to keep America's farms running.

President of New York Farm Bureau, Dean Norton, said, "Farm labor is an essential component to planting and harvesting the fresh fruits and vegetables that grow so well in New York State. But because the H2A visa program is often the only means to help farmers ensure an adequate and legal workforce on their farms, when there are delays or problems with the program, it can put our crops—and by extension, our entire businesses—at significant risk. Congresswoman Slaughter's efforts to foster dialogue between the U.S. Department of Labor and farmers during the past year has led to some important improvements in the H2A program and our farmers are hopeful this process will continue. In addition, our farmers appreciate that DOL is working in such a cooperative spirit to discuss the problems and find solutions for a smoother and more effective H2A program."

Thanks to attention by the Department of Labor which comes from input gained in their direct conversations with Upstate Growers which Slaughter facilitated, improvements have been made

to better use technology and provide more guidance to growers.

A list of improvements made by the Department of Labor in the past year are included below. Further resources are available at www.louise.house.gov.

This is another important step by Slaughter, who won a major legislative victory with passage of the STOCK Act in April, in making government more accountable, transparent and fair.

Improvements Made to the H-2A Process in the Last Year Thanks to Cooperation Between Slaughter, Local Growers and the Department of Labor

- ***Making Better Use of the Internet.*** New York is one of the selected states to participate in a pilot e-mail program allowing the Department to communicate more efficiently with growers. In addition, a dedicated e-mail address has been established for growers to ask direct questions to the National Processing Center in Chicago (TLC.Chicago@dol.gov).

- ***Establishing a Web-Based Filing System.*** The Department of Labor is also working to develop a new web-based filing system for the H-2A program that will allow growers to check an application's status electronically. The Labor Department announced that the new system should be ready for implementation in late summer 2012.

- ***Providing More Guidance Before Filing.*** The Department of Labor has developed "[filing tips](#)" based on actual problems encountered by growers. The Department continues to post [Frequently Asked Questions](#) on an ongoing basis and published an H-2A Small Business Handbook fall 2011. Resources were made readily accessible on the Department's website, such as the [Adverse Effect Wage Rate](#) for their state.

- ***Frequent Communication with Growers.*** The Department of Labor held three "stakeholder" conference calls this past winter and will continue to seek input and advise from the grower community to discuss emerging issues to address before they turn into a larger problem.

Timeline of Slaughter's Work to Get Local Growers Access to the Labor They Need

In March 2011, Slaughter met with local farmers and staff from the Department of Labor in her Washington office where they outlined their concerns with the cumbersome H-2A application process.

Last June, Slaughter [wrote to U.S. Department of Labor Secretary Hilda Solis](#) outlining the concerns of farmers as they experienced more inconsistencies in their H-2A applications saying, "According to farmers in my district, many who have participated in the program for decades, the H-2A program has become increasingly difficult to use as a result of the multiple changes that have occurred in the past five years."

In July, Slaughter hosted a follow up [summit with Deputy Secretary Seth Harris](#), Members of Congress and several regional growers that allowed many of the concerns raised consistently by local growers to be addressed directly by the Department of Labor.

In September, Deputy Secretary Harris [wrote to Slaughter](#) pledging to complete eight actionable items to improve the administration of the program by making better use of the internet, establishing a web-based filing system, providing more guidance to growers before they file necessary paperwork, and making Department representatives available to growers early in the process to more quickly iron out any discrepancies.

In December, the Department of Labor [released an Employer Handbook for employers anticipating filing an H-2A application](#) for next season. The 16-page hand book, complete with information on filing job orders and H-2A applications, conducting recruitment for U.S. workers, completing the temporary labor certification process and other helpful resources, [can be found here.](#)

In January, the [Department of Labor announced](#) in a letter to Slaughter that they have awarded a contract to a firm that will begin the process of putting elements of the H-2A program online.

In April, Slaughter's office [hosted a conference call with more than a dozen local growers](#) and top officials at the Labor Department to discuss the improvements made to the process since the July meeting.